A User's Guide to Proper Names

Their Pragmatics And Semantics

Anna Pilatova

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Their Pragmatics And Semantics

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Anna Pilatova

geboren op 30 maart 1971
te Praag (Tsjechië)

To my grandmothers, Rachil and Jaryna,

some of the strongest and most extraordinary women

I have had the honour to meet.

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Amsterdam — Anna Pilatova
June, 2005.

Preface

The origins of this work go all the way to my reading of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* in 1993. It had left me with a feeling of dissatisfaction that lingered long enough to inspire my MA thesis (on *Internalism and Externalism in the Theories of Reference*), and finally inspired the current work. Over time, I became acquainted with other influential accounts of reference of proper names, but my unease with essentialism and wariness of direct designation remained.

In the *User's Guide to Proper Names*, I seized the opportunity to analyse what I thought was problematic about the mainstream theories of reference of proper names. I tried to tease apart a number of related doctrines about the behaviour of proper names, and thus arrive at a better understanding of how the various parts of the theories of reference I chose to analyse are related. This helped me to develop my own proposal regarding both the semantics and the pragmatics of proper names.

The *Guide* is organised around a particular approach to the tasks of a semantic theory. According to this approach, proposed by Stalnaker, a semantic theory dealing with proper names should account for the descriptive semantics of names, their foundational semantics, and the semantics of modal statements in which they figure. Descriptive semantics focuses on the contribution a proper name makes to the truth-value of sentences in which it occurs. Based on such an analysis, a proper name is assigned a semantic value, which

is supposed to provide us with an interpretation of that name. A crucial part of this task is to see just what kind of thing the semantic value of a proper name is.

In interpreting sentences containing proper names, one can, and often does, use the notion of possible worlds. This is especially true if the sentences in question are modal. There are various approaches to modality, which carry with them different sets of presuppositions. An analysis of the systematic features and presuppositions of various possible-world frameworks is a part of the task of the semantics of modal statements. Another task of semantics of modal statements is to investigate where the constraints on possible worlds used in analysing these statements derive from, that is, whether, and to what degree, they should derive from the descriptive or the foundational part of the semantic enterprise.

Both of these parts of a semantic theory have the potential to make predictions about the foundational semantics of proper names, which deals with the speaker's behaviour and communication. Foundational semantics aims at answering the following question: What makes it the case that the language spoken by a particular individual or community has the very descriptive semantics it has? In this investigation, one looks at the speaker, her intentions and communicative goals, and tries to identify the strategies she uses to get her (linguistic) point across.

The *User's Guide to Proper Names* is divided in two basic parts. The first part, encompassing chapters one through to four, is devoted to a reconstruction and analysis of several influential approaches to the semantics of proper names. The second part of the thesis, chapters five to seven, contains my own proposal regarding the semantics of proper names and a conclusion.

The first part of the thesis starts with an introductory chapter, *Outlining the Field and Introducing Some of the Players*. Its task is to show the usefulness of organising the thesis around the distinction between descriptive, modal, and foundational semantics, and to provide a proper characterisation of these notions. In the second part of the same chapter, *Setting the Scene*, I give a preliminary outline of some of the notions needed to describe the theories of reference

that are later investigated, that is mainly the theories proposed by Kripke, Kaplan, Lewis, and Stalnaker.

The second chapter, *Descriptive Semantics*, focuses on the descriptive semantics proposed by Kripke and Kaplan for proper names. In the first part of the chapter, I introduce several arguments in favour of rigid designation. A closer look reveals that none of the three arguments in question – the modal, the epistemological, and the semantic one – is actually an argument *for* rigid designation. They all just argue *against* some forms of descriptivism. Moreover, in the case of the modal and the epistemological argument, it is relatively easy to find forms of descriptivism that are immune to the lines of reasoning proposed in the arguments. The semantic argument seems to be the strongest of the three because it relies on a straightforward clash of intuitions regarding the identity of individuals.

An analysis of a direct argument for rigid designation also highlights the connection between rigid designation and certain preconceptions about the identity of individuals. A further investigation of issues related to the identity of individuals across possible worlds emerges at this point as an important issue to tackle. It also becomes clear that rigid designation alone cannot fully determine the Kripkean picture of names as non-descriptive entities referring without a mediation of any sort of conceptual content.

In the second part of Chapter 2, I introduce the basic notions of Kaplan's approach to the descriptive semantics of proper names. It turns out that in order to derive the familiar Kripkean picture of proper names, one has to presuppose direct reference for names and at least some version of haecceitism for the individuals in question. While, as we show, Kaplan's framework does not work well for proper names, it gives us some conceptual tools that help us in our undertaking.

In the third chapter, *Modal Statements, Individuals, and Essences*, I analyse three different approaches to building a possible-world framework, Lewis's, Kripke's, and Stalnaker's. In each case, the same questions are asked: What is the motivation and intended field of application of this framework? What are the ontological

commitments of the approach? What form of essentialism, if any, does it imply? How does it deal with the notion of an individual?

In Lewis's case, the main problem turns out to be the theory of counterparts, which is, as I show, an integral part of his approach. The concept of an individual implied by it does not seem to correspond to any intuitive reading of counterfactual statements involving individuals. The investigation of Kripke's framework focuses on describing the weakest form of essentialism that has to be presupposed to make the proposal work. Once that is concluded, I analyse the essentialism Kripke actually proposes, and the motivation and presuppositions on which it rests. I conclude that its motivation cannot be said to come from an analysis of language and that it presupposes a particular form of scientific realism. The rest of the chapter is devoted to a reconstruction and analysis of Stalnaker's possible world framework, which turns out to be rather more cautious about metaphysical presuppositions and better suited for an analysis of natural language. As in the two previous proposals, I try to reconstruct the notion of actual world that is presupposed here.

In the fourth chapter, *Foundational Semantics*, I investigate the notion of proposition implied by Lewis's, Kripke's, and Stalnaker's approach. I focus on propositions containing proper names, and analyse the way in which each of the conceptions mentioned above is vulnerable to the problem of logical omniscience. An analysis of Lewis's framework reveals that the concept of proposition implied by it is so weak as to be rather uninteresting. An investigation of Kripke's concept of proposition deals not only with the systematic issues, but also with the Pierre puzzle and various attempts at solving it. I present a number of different approaches to the problem and compare their merits. Stalnaker is very worried about the problem of logical omniscience, and yet it turns out that his conception is less vulnerable to the adverse consequences of the problem of logical omniscience than other frameworks we investigate. I point out that various pragmatic features of Stalnaker's framework (the epistemic nature of his possible-world framework, the Gricean principles built into the notion of assertion) help to counterbalance and mitigate the scope of the problem of logical omniscience within it.

In the fifth chapter, *User-friendly Descriptive Semantics*, which is also the first chapter of the second part, I present and motivate my own proposal for the descriptive semantics of proper names and the treatment of modal statements in which they figure. Basically, my aim is to preserve the notion of names as rigidly designating expressions while allowing in as little metaphysics as possible. Working with epistemic possible worlds whose domain is in each case co-determined by a particular context enables me to develop a very intuitive plausible notion of individual, to which a name can be said to refer rigidly. The interpretation of modal statements is then driven not by essentialist constraints in the common sense of the term, but by context-derived limitations, which seems to be a more natural approach.

In the sixth chapter, *Foundational Semantics: Names, Indexicality, and Ambiguity*, I develop a view of foundational semantics inspired by the pragmatic observation that in common parlance one can say that a name, e.g., 'John Smith', can refer to numerous individuals. A lot of attention is given to the ontology of names, and the question 'What is a name?' delivers answers which are then used in a discussion whether names should be seen as indexical or ambiguous. I adopt the ambiguity view, and propose a way of using a Stalnakerian possible-world framework to derive intuitively plausible results for some difficult cases.

In the final chapter, *Conclusion*, I emphasise that my approach throughout the *Guide* relies on a careful examination of different kinds of presuppositions implied by various possible-world frameworks and the notion of the individual used in accounts of the behaviour of proper names. In my own account of these issues, I do without any metaphysical assumptions and aim at describing communication in terms accessible to the speaker and hearer.